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STATE FOR NEA/MAG AND DRL/NESCA

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TAGS: PHUM PREL PBTS WI MO

SUBJECT: WESTERN SAHARA: ACTIVIST DESCRIBES HOPE AND  
FRUSTRATION IN TERRITORY

REF: 07 RABAT 1873

Classified By: DCM Robert Jackson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) Pro-independence Sahrawi human rights activist Brahim Dahane (strictly protect) told us there is a sense among Sahrawis, even in separatist circles, that something potentially positive is coming out of the Manhasset process.

He hotly disputed Government of Morocco (GOM) attempts to liken separatists to Islamist terrorists like Al Qaeda. Dahane complained that the GOM was harassing his NGO, especially members with technical skills like web site management. He described growing contacts with Moroccan human rights groups. He said Sahrawi civil society (on all sides) is determined to move forward on development, regardless of the political direction of the Sahara dispute.

End Summary.

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Hope and Anger Over Manhasset  
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¶3. (C) On January 16, PolCouns and PolOffs met with President of the Sahrawi Association of Human Rights Abuse Victims (ASVDH) Brahim Dahane (strictly protect throughout) at the Embassy. Dahane, who bills himself (credibly) as more human rights advocate than political activist, does not disguise his pro-separatist tendencies and contacts with the senior POLISARIO leadership. He met with POLISARIO Chief/Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) President Abdelaziz last October in Rome. He said that there is a general initial agreement in the territory that engagement through the Manhasset process is a good thing, but pro-independence activists are reserving judgment on their long-term utility in achieving gains. They are willing to trust the process a little while longer, but want to see concrete results soon. He said that pro-independence Sahrawis have not given up hope, but feelings are beginning to harden around a need for new tactics--to include some violence in the form of sabotage.

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POLISARIO Congress was Symbolic  
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¶4. (C) Dahane said the December POLISARIO Congress in Tifariti was an important symbolic morale boost and, paradoxically, gave the independence movement renewed desire to continue the negotiation process. Prior to the Congress, Dahane said, the POLISARIO felt painted into a corner by a UN process perceived as biased towards Morocco. They felt that 40 years of legal decisions and resolutions had been turned on their head by the international community's rapid acceptance of Morocco's initiative, and that decades of peaceful diplomacy by the Front had only lost them ground. After the Congress, held in disputed territory and characterized by bellicose rhetoric, Dahane said that many independence activists believed that the POLISARIO had "made its point" about not being taken for granted and tilted the scales of influence back towards itself. As a result, the movement returned to the negotiating table with renewed confidence and vigor.

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Yes, Talk of a Return to Arms, But...  
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¶5. (C) Dahane cautioned the USG against reacting too strongly to the POLISARIO's recent statements about a return to armed struggle. He said that the movement modeled itself after the African National Congress and that massive, disruptive civil disobedience and targeted sabotage attacks on critical infrastructure were more part of its toolkit now than open war. He disputed GOM "propaganda" that painted the POLISARIO and independence activists as terrorists and violent extremists. He mentioned a recent incident in which a couple of grenades were found outside Laayoune (possibly dating to the 1980s). He said that the GOM created a media

circus around the find and implied that they were part of a separatist weapons cache.

¶6. (C) Dahane vehemently argued that the independence movement had absolutely nothing to do with pan-Arab terror groups such as Al Qaeda. He said that the POLISARIO and independence activists still bitterly resent the Gulf states financing of Morocco's war against the Sahrawis during the 1970s and 1980s.

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Human Rights Struggle Continues...  
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¶7. (C) Dahane described a continuing and increasingly focused campaign of harassment and oppression waged by the GOM against both pro-independence and human rights activists in the territory. He said that the GOM is now targeting pro-independence NGOs' ability to communicate their message to the outside world by targeting leaders responsible for website publishing and editing. He pointed to the late December arrests of Brahim Ansari, Mohammed Mayoz and Said Bellal, all three specifically responsible for maintaining the ASVDH's flagship website, as an example of this new tactic. Dahane also mentioned a case in October in which a commercial photography shop in the territory that had developed pictures of injuries allegedly suffered by Sahrawi activists at GOM hands was pressured by security officials to disclose the names of the customers who had provided the negatives. He said that the strategy was having an effect, as Sahrawis were less inclined to take to the streets now than they had been in the past.

¶8. (C) Dahane was in Rabat to attend the trial of Sahrawi activist Said Bellal, arrested in Smara in December 2007 on disorderly conduct charges following a demonstration. He was subsequently charged with leading student demonstrations in Rabat in May 2007, which is why he was being charged here. Bellal's defense team, led by former vice president of the Moroccan Bar Association Mohammed Aqdim, argued that the statute of limitations for Bellal to be charged "in flagrante" for a crime allegedly committed in May had long expired. Additionally, Dahane said that police statements

retroactively placing Bellal at the scene of the demonstrations were patently false.

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...But a Strong Civil Society Must be Developed  
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¶19. (C) Dahane further criticized the GOM for refusing to allow Sahrawi NGOs like ASVDH and the Sahrawi Collective of Human Rights Defenders (CODESA) to register. Without registration, such groups are unable to accept foreign and domestic project funding or training and cannot advocate legally within the system for change, nor can they legally engage other NGOs in an attempt to develop "Track Two" solutions through civil society engagement on both sides of the berm.

¶10. (C) Dahane said that ASVDH had been offered support by groups in Denmark and Egypt to counsel and rehabilitate torture victims, but could not implement any projects due to its lack of legal standing. Dahane insisted that his and other Sahrawi organizations stand ready to work with any NGOs, separatist or pro-Morocco, to build a better future for all in the territory regardless of negotiation outcomes - but the GOM's current policy of preventing the development of a truly balanced civil society was hampering grass roots peace-building efforts.

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Comment  
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¶11. (C) Dahane is generally perceived as a credible interlocutor who avoids sensationalism. While an unabashed independence supporter who says the POLISARIO speaks for him, he remains independent, unlike the other main Sahrawi human rights organization, CODESA, which sometimes appears subject to POLISARIO direction. His comments about a need to build a strong civil society as a hedge against violence and to facilitate transition mesh with what we have heard from our Sahara-based NGO contacts, both separatist and pro-Morocco - as does his plea for international capacity building assistance (reftel). End Comment.

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<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/rabat>  
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